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ABSTRACT

The goal of the early childhood teacher training program at the University of Maryland in Baltimore County is to develop teachers who are able to integrate their own understandings and feelings of self with appropriate actions in the classroom. The program has four components, within each of which the teacher-in-training's knowledge, understanding of self, and practical application are integrated. The four components are (1) conferencing processes, (2) direct instruction in early childhood education content, (3) experiences in observing and recording child behavior and in organizing instruction for young children, and (4) processes for examining one's own feelings and beliefs regarding issues and experiences related to children. The program is also organized into three student achievement levels. At level one, the student teachers focus on human development and become adept at observing and recording children's behavior. Student teachers at level two concentrate more on curriculum and the special needs of children. Level three is the student teaching internship in which students are expected to integrate previous types of learning. (PCB)

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Theory Into Practice: Field Based Education Programs Do Work

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Paul Torrence has described the young child as one "who is always asking questions, becoming completely absorbed in the search for the truth, trying to make sense out of his world and making guesses and testing them, trying to discover his limits and the limits of the situation." (1970, p. 3).

Teaching these young children can be a very challenging, yet absorbing and exhilarating experience. A program that prepares teachers of these young children should offer challenges, but at the same time excitement and wonder, for teachers-in-training learn not only about the child but also learn about their own skills and potentials for working with young children.

At the University of Maryland Baltimore County we have designed a program that prepares teachers for the young child (birth to eight years) which has a multi-dimensional design and which attempts to teach preservice teachers via a process approach.

The goal of our program is to develop competent teachers. That is, teachers who are able to integrate their own understandings and feelings of self with appropriate actions in the classroom. We make some assumptions about competent teachers.

Competent teachers are knowledgeable about the content of the curriculum that they will be teaching young children (language arts, reading, math, science, social studies, art, music, literature). They also are interested and enthusiastic about gaining new insights regarding this knowledge, as children probe and ask questions.

Competent teachers have developed accurate perceptions regarding young children's development and behavior patterns. They know about the different developmental theories regarding such behavior, thus they are able to recognize the wide range of differences among children.

Competent teachers are able to select appropriate goals for the children in their classrooms. They recognize that goals set for children, whether by themselves or others, may at times have conflicting requirements. These teachers are able to establish priorities regarding these conflicting requirements and are able to justify their choices.

Competent teachers have an understanding of a wide range of methods and techniques that are appropriate for teaching young children. They have developed an awareness of their own style and unique teaching ability. They are able to select appropriate methods and techniques that fit both their abilities and the abilities and needs of the children in their classroom.

As the UMBC staff developed this program we made some assumptions regarding adult learning. For example, teachers-in-training will develop knowledge and competencies at a greater depth when the learning takes place in a structure (1) that requires examination of one's own beliefs in a comfortable environment; (2) that requires one to experiment with ideas and practices for teaching children without too great risk of failure and (3) that requires continuous feedback.

Upon these assumptions the program was designed with four major components. Though each component is different all must integrate the teacher-in-training's knowledge, understanding of self, and practical application.

The four components are:

(1) Conferencing processes:

(2) Direct Instruction in Early Childhood Education content:

(3) Experiences in observing and recording child behavior and in organizing instruction for young children:

(4) Processes for examining one's own feelings and beliefs regarding issues and experiences related to children.

Conferencing Process

This process begins as students start into the program. We have an interview/information session in which students are given an overview of the program and share with the early childhood staff their own interests and background of experiences with young children. They also share some of their academic interests and eventually select an academic area that they will pursue in depth. The range of choices are wide: history, computer science, biology, sociology, psychology, English literature, American studies, Spanish (or other languages), art, dance, theater.

Conferences which are collaborative efforts involving students, University faculty, and cooperating teachers, occur throughout the entire program. For example, prior to student teaching, students work two mornings a week in a school setting. A University professor observes their work in the classroom at least four times per semester and holds conferences immediately after the observation with both the student and with the cooperating teacher. This exchange provides all three with a forum for sharing understanding of expectations and of the student's continued growth.

In addition, every semester each student has two formal, regularly scheduled conferences (staffings) with the entire early childhood staff in which the student examines his own progress in academic work, ability to work with children, and understanding of his own skill development. Other conferences do take place, informally or formally, if/when requested by students, faculty or cooperating teachers.

Direct Instruction

Direct instruction occurs in early childhood courses. In all courses a deliberate effort is made toward integration of child growth and development, guidance of young children, diagnosis and remediation, early childhood curriculum content/methods/activities/materials, historical and philosophical perspectives, administration and organization of schools and parent participation in the educational process. The courses are organized around the processes of perceiving, knowing, communicating, creating, feeling, valuing, decision making and problem solving. Students study theories related to many aspects of child growth and development to learning and teaching in the early years. Students study theories related to many aspects of child growth and development to learning and teaching in the early years. Students observe children in classrooms and plan instruction for these children in order to analyze and describe the theories in relation to their own experiences and observations.

Experience

During four semesters prior to student teaching, students work two mornings a week under the direction of skilled teachers. These field experiences provide opportunities for working with children from ages birth - eight years in schools of great variety. Students encounter principals with different philosophies, teachers with different classroom management and organizational styles, children from very different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, and parents with different expectations and involvement in their children's education.

In all their early childhood education courses students are required to "test" their learning "theories" with children; thus, a continuous interaction

takes place between theory and practice. Since discussion is one of the modes of instruction in the on-campus courses, similarities and differences of practices are analyzed and debated.

Examination of Feelings and Beliefs

Examining one's own feelings and beliefs regarding issues related to children is the fourth component of the program. Informally, this process occurs in all aspects of the program and comes as a natural part of the many interactions that take place between university instructors, students and cooperating teachers in the schools. More formally, there are process seminars organized around content areas, such as children's literature, creative media, math/science activities. Though students are learning about content suitable for young children in these courses, they are also examining their own feelings and skills relative to this content. Children's books provide means for sharing and developing insights into children's feelings such as fear of monsters, love of a friend, jealousy of a sibling, anger at parents for separating or confusion about a pet or a grandparent dying. Students are encouraged to examine their own feelings and reactions to such events in their own lives and to compare more mature feelings to children's feelings and reactions (as related in the stories as well as from observation in classroom settings).

In creative media process seminar students are required to do painting, woodworking, sculpturing, movement, dance and puppetry and then share with each other either their enjoyment or frustrations with the experience. They compare their own feelings with what children in their classrooms seem to be demonstrating as they have worked in these media under various conditions.

For the students these processes of learning content, working with

children in the classroom and sharing feelings and reactions to various events enable them to be more open to their own new learning experiences and more open to children's growth and development.

The program is organized into three student achievement levels. Particular skills and competencies are emphasized at each level. Level I students focus on human development and become adept at observing and recording children's behavior. They begin to develop skills in planning a single lesson with specific objectives in mind. Level II students focus more on curriculum and the special needs of children. They refine their skills of observing, learn to plan and implement more complex lessons and units of learning, while at the same time they learn to adjust plans for the special needs child. Level III is the student teaching internship; here students are expected to integrate previous learning. Level III students are required to assess children's abilities and provide long range units of instruction. Students expand their own concept of a teacher's role in society and examine the political and social forces that affect education. Students also compare education of young children in America with the education of young children in other parts of the world as part of their seminar.

Evaluation

The evaluation of the program is an ongoing process involving all levels of the education community. Students typically feel very comfortable in sharing with the staff what they perceive as both strengths and weaknesses of the program. At the end of each semester a written evaluation is completed by students, providing feedback for each course's strength, weaknesses and suggestions for improvement. Changes are made in the program on the basis of this feedback. For example, students themselves suggested that handwriting

skills be expanded into the program as they discovered that they had forgotten how to make the near perfect manuscript letters so necessary for young children to see in the early years in schools.

Routinely teachers in the classrooms share with us their evaluation of the students we send into their classrooms. Often principals and other supervisors observe and formally (or informally) assess the students, while they conduct a lesson with young children. Teachers and principals are also invited to comment on specific strengths and weaknesses of our training program. We are responsive to their input and they are comfortable in providing suggestions. For example, content and requirements for our Teaching of Reading Course initiated four years ago have been modified as a result of the feedback from the cooperating teachers.

Formal questionnaires are sent to employers of our students and to the graduates of our programs. Again responses come back to the department indicating the strengths our students exhibit as they become teachers and also the areas where they feel more training might be considered. At the present time, as a result of this particular source of feedback, we are examining our course content related to "working with parents" or "parent participation in the educational process." Students were indicating that they feel less secure in working with parents than in any other aspect of their teaching assignments.

Unique Qualities of Our Program

The content and sequencing of our courses are developed as a team effort. Textbook decisions, requirements for the course, and final grade assignments are made as a total team effort. Occasionally a course may be team taught, but usually one of the staff assumes responsibility for the instruction in a particular class.

The professors and instructors who teach the courses supervise students in the field and hold frequent conferences with them. The faculty members help bridge the relationship between the campus content courses and the reality of the classroom situation. There is a great deal of individual instruction as a result of this conferencing.

The program has a very strong field component. Each education content course is linked with a field experience course that requires that the student spend at least two half days per week involved in planned systematic observation and teaching young children. The complexity and intensity of involvement increases as the student progresses in the program. This affords maximum integration of theory and practice.

The instruction in the program is organized around processes rather than around content areas. Students study units of knowledge and how this knowledge and understanding fits into the total program. Students themselves experience the total training program as a developmental process.

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